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4

IN FORTNIGHTLY PARTS

The Ancestral Trail

AN EPIC STORY OF MYTHS, MAGIC AND MONSTERS

4 Mirra the Magician

Battle of Wits in the City of Stone

Jutek Keller ®

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From a story by Frank Graves

On the Fourth Day . . .

An acrid lair devolves to stone.
The sorceress is now full-grown.
A sickle's strike one mighty felled.
By burning letters, evil quelled.
One orb purple, one orb blue,
Night light helps release the True.
Survive the fight, regain the prize.
Beyond the height a fine surprise.

Melek and Orkan stood silent – helpless bystanders in the war of nerves unfolding in front of them. Richard's eyes flickered from pod to spider, calculating distances, weighing up chances. It was stalemate. Finally Orkan made the choice for him. "Run," he shouted. "Leave the pod. If you try for it now, Baal will kill you. We'll come back for it."

With Orkan chivvying everyone along, they soon put a safe distance between themselves and the spider. As they ran, Richard noticed something strange about the forest. Although night was closing in, the tangled boughs were lit as clearly as if it were day. Stranger still, their shadows seemed to have multiplied into an eerie fan of alternating light and dark, which gave Richard the impression of running through strobes.

Over the edge

The ground was rising gently underfoot, and after a while Richard realized he was running up a steep slope. When he reached the top he turned to the others, but Orkan, dragging Melek by the arm, barrelled him over the ridge.

"Don't stop!" Orkan shouted.

Richard had little choice. The ground fell away sharply beneath him and once over the edge, he had little hope of

climbing back. Neither did the others. Propelled by Orkan's energy, the three slithered helplessly down a bank of straggly trees.

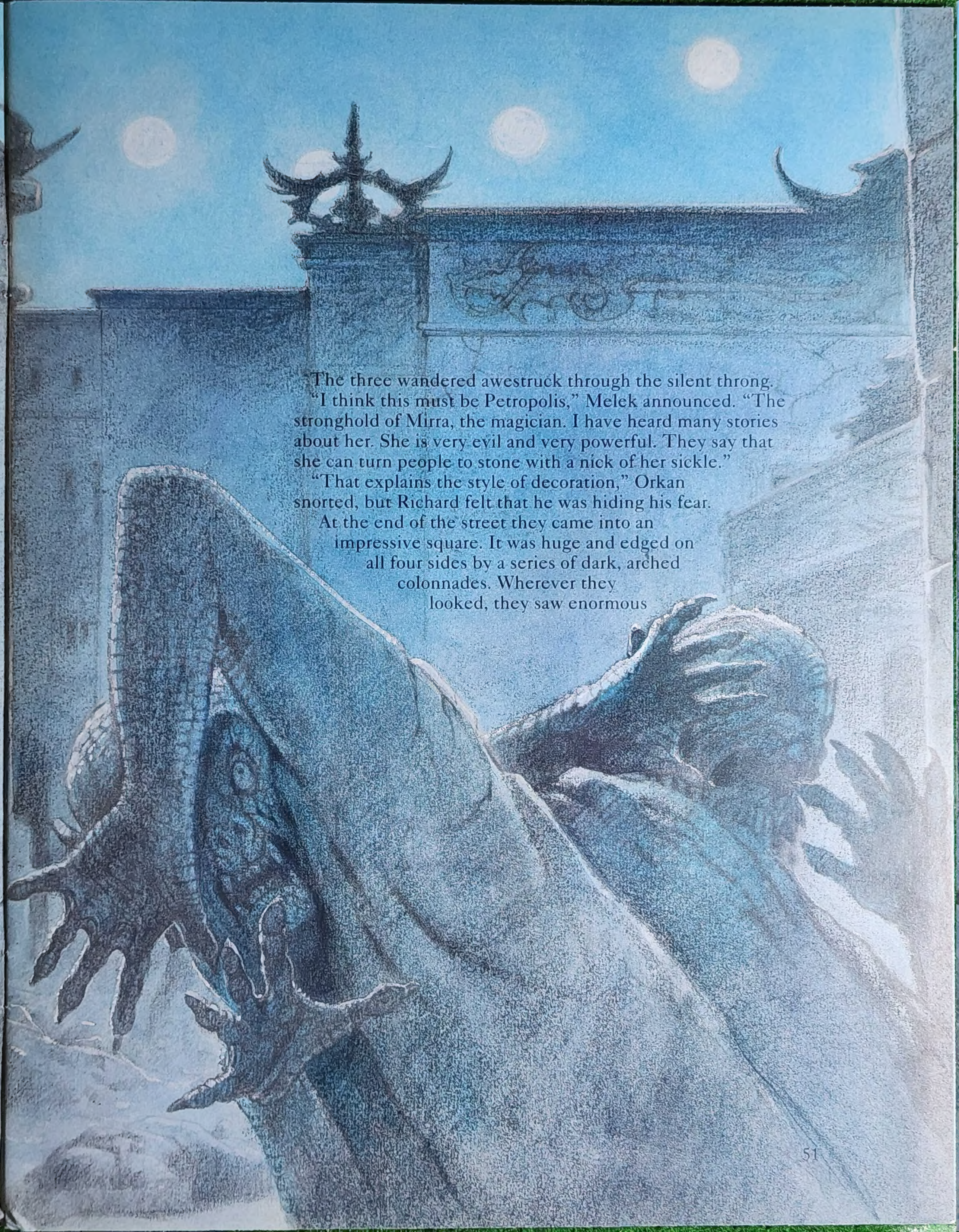
They found themselves standing in a dry, sandy gulch. Above their heads the stars were blotted out by ten evenly-spaced moons whose radiance cast a web of shadows over the landscape. In the conflicting light, the rectangular, white block of a walled city stood out, set near the bottom of the valley.

"Look there," Richard said, pointing at the buildings. "We might find someone to help us get the pod back."

The companions made their way to the walled city in silence. Two gigantic pillars of stone greeted them at the main gates. Looking beyond, they saw a smooth avenue of white houses slashed by dark alleyways. The whole place had a still, silent quality. When the trio started to explore, Richard saw why.

City of Stone

Everything Richard looked at in the city was made of stone. Even the creatures, who had been running in all directions, were frozen in flight. On every face was etched an expression of horror.

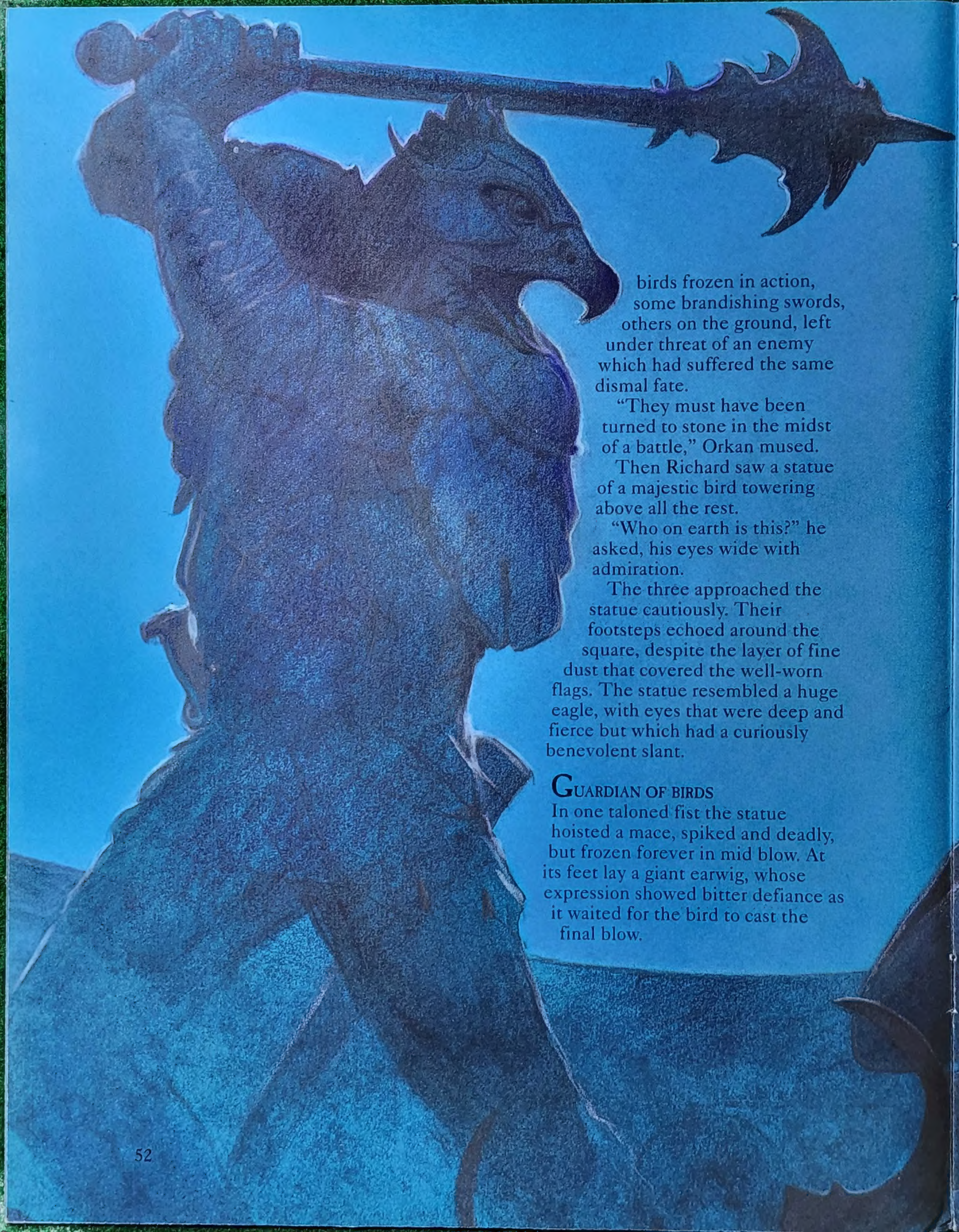


The three wandered awestruck through the silent throng.

"I think this must be Petropolis," Melek announced. "The stronghold of Mirra, the magician. I have heard many stories about her. She is very evil and very powerful. They say that she can turn people to stone with a nick of her sickle."

"That explains the style of decoration," Orkan snorted, but Richard felt that he was hiding his fear.

At the end of the street they came into an impressive square. It was huge and edged on all four sides by a series of dark, arched colonnades. Wherever they looked, they saw enormous



birds frozen in action, some brandishing swords, others on the ground, left under threat of an enemy which had suffered the same dismal fate.

"They must have been turned to stone in the midst of a battle," Orkan mused.

Then Richard saw a statue of a majestic bird towering above all the rest.

"Who on earth is this?" he asked, his eyes wide with admiration.

The three approached the statue cautiously. Their footsteps echoed around the square, despite the layer of fine dust that covered the well-worn flags. The statue resembled a huge eagle, with eyes that were deep and fierce but which had a curiously benevolent slant.

Guardian of Birds

In one taloned fist the statue hoisted a mace, spiked and deadly, but frozen forever in mid blow. At its feet lay a giant earwig, whose expression showed bitter defiance as it waited for the bird to cast the final blow.

"I think it's Juroot," Melek said quickly. A hint of awe made his voice sound trembly. "He is – or rather he was – the Guardian of Birds and Keeper of Truth."

"If he's a Guardian," Richard said, "we must try and free him."

"Mirra is the only one who can reverse the spell," Melek said. "They say she uses a pair of mirrors and the light of the moons, but only she knows how." He looked at his companions.

"Maybe the prophecy will help," Richard suggested. They waited as Melek turned the pages then read aloud.

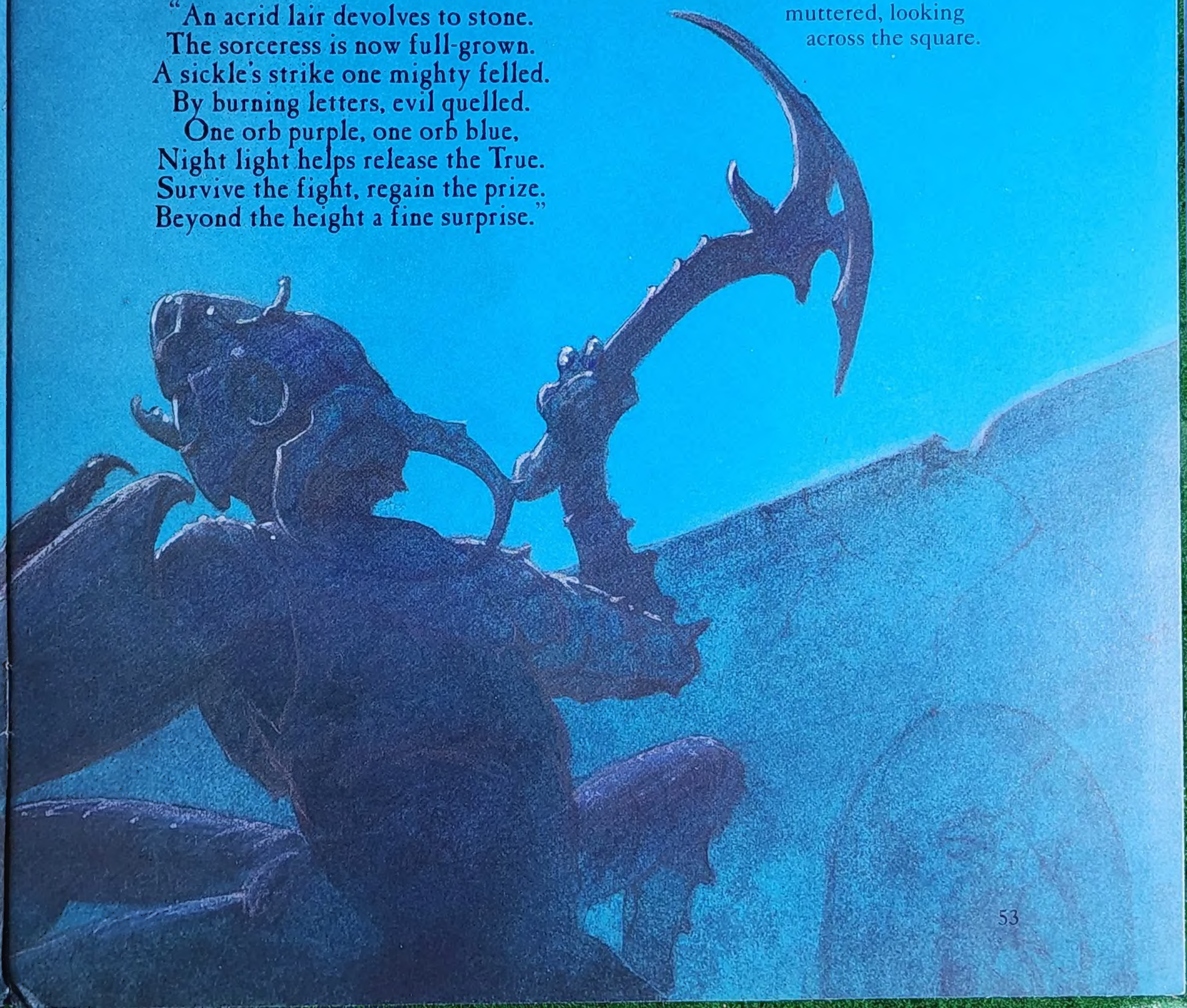
"An acrid lair devolves to stone.
The sorceress is now full-grown.
A sickle's strike one mighty felled.
By burning letters, evil quelled.
One orb purple, one orb blue,
Night light helps release the True.
Survive the fight, regain the prize.
Beyond the height a fine surprise."

"I wish these prophecies were easier to understand," Orkan said wistfully. "All I can make out is that there'll be a fight and we'll survive it."

Richard looked at the verse again. "I don't understand where the 'burning letters' come in," he said thoughtfully, "but it does say we'll get the prize, and that's got to be the pod. The sorceress must be Mirra, so we had better be very careful while we're in Petropolis."

The dwarf shut the heavy tome and hoisted it back on to his shoulders.

"I don't think we'll have to look very far for Mirra," Orkan muttered, looking across the square.



A tall red-haired figure had emerged from one of the dark arches and was sidling noiselessly in their direction. They stared transfixed as Mirra came closer. She wore long dark robes and gold bracelets shaped like serpents. In the strange moonlight, the metal glinted making the snakes seem almost alive on her arms. In one hand she carried a small sickle and in the other, two round mirrors.

Outwitting the magician

"I see you're admiring my collection," Mirra said sharply. "Very fine, isn't it?" Her voice was cold. She fixed the trio with watchful eyes as she drifted closer.

"I must distract her," Richard thought, tugging nervously at Golan's amulet. Suddenly the Guardian's voice floated into his mind, "Give her the badge."

Richard faced the magician. "You must be Mirra," he said. "My friends and I have travelled far to find you." He unclipped Muldoon's badge and held it out. "The Evil One has sent us to give you this, as a reward for your loyalty."

"Ahh," Mirra sighed with satisfaction.

She tucked the mirrors and sickle under one arm and stretched out her hand. As she fastened the ornament to her robes, Mirra looked at the trio. "Now I must give you something too. I know, you shall have immortality – among my collection of statues." She raised her sickle.

Richard glanced at his companions. Orkan and Melek were looking round in desperation. Neither could see any obvious way of escape. Then Richard tugged at Orkan's sleeve. Mirra's robes were beginning to smoulder.

Muldoon's badge was glowing with a deep, red heat. Suddenly the mysterious script on its rim spat out across Mirra's breast in flaming, liquid drops of burning metal. The magician screamed angrily. Dropping the sickle and mirrors, she beat desperately at the source of her agony.

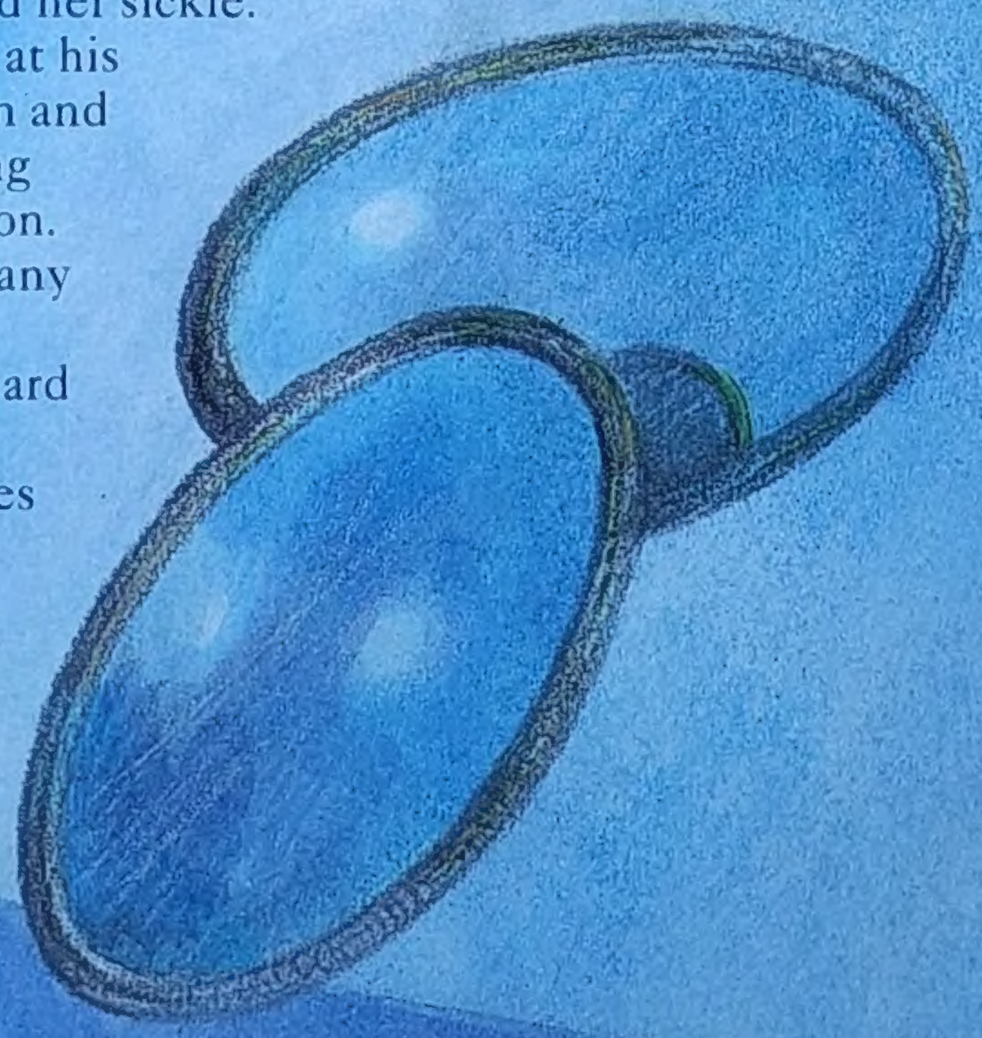
Richard moved quickly. Seizing the sickle, he struck at her robes. Before he made contact, an icy hand closed around his wrist. For an instant Mirra's eyes met Richard's. They were filled with utter hatred. Then the flames reached her face and she snatched back her hand to claw at her burning flesh. Her bracelets seemed to writhe in pain as the flames licked Mirra's wrists.

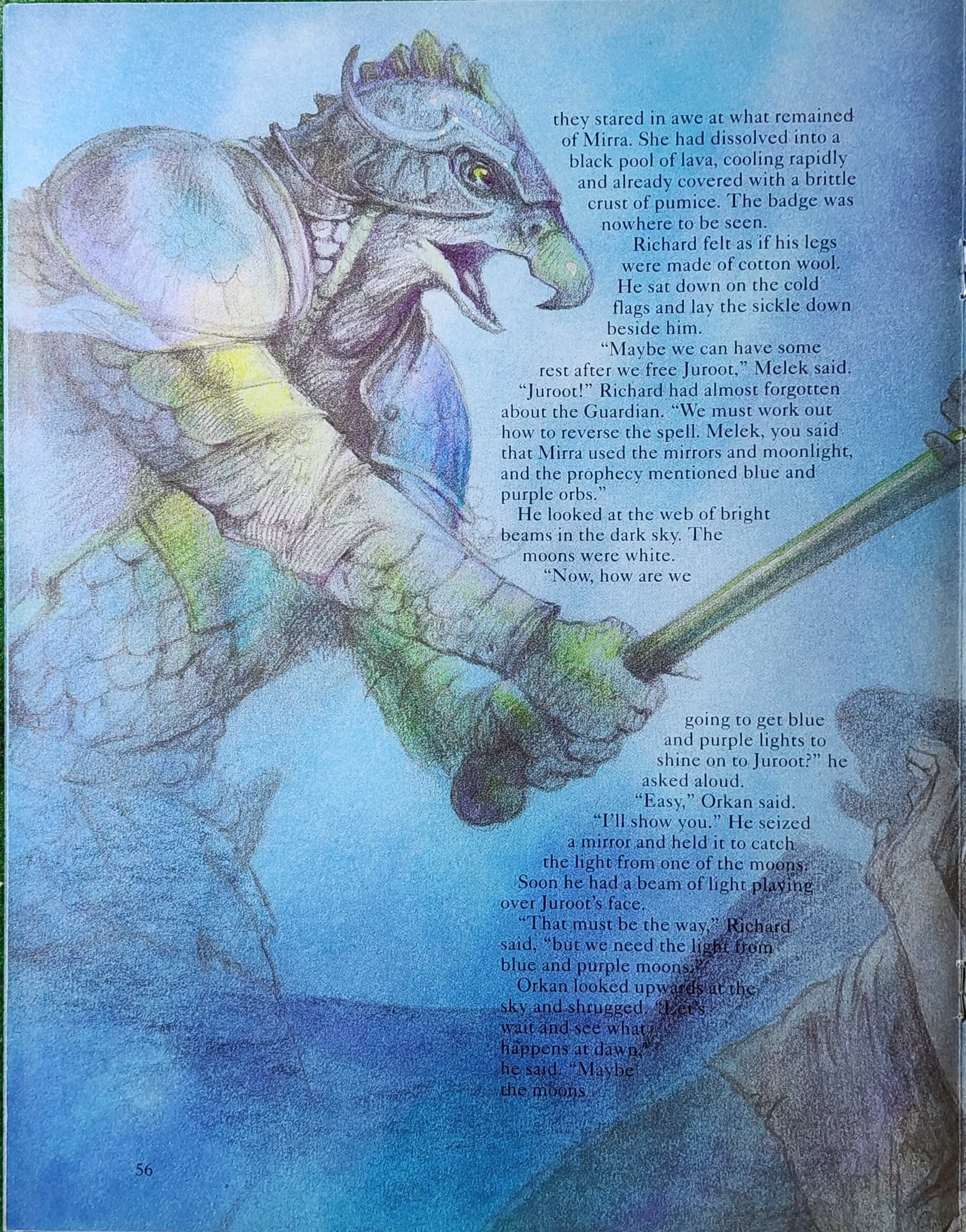
Quickly, Richard bore down with the sickle again. He felt it catch on her robe and struck again with all his strength. When he felt the sickle sink into flesh he quickly pulled it away.

Magic meltdown

When Richard looked up again, Mirra was an angular statue, frozen in a posture of agony. Yet still the brooch burned on. Choking and scattering for fresh air, the trio turned away from the burning effigy.

After the smoke had cleared





they stared in awe at what remained of Mirra. She had dissolved into a black pool of lava, cooling rapidly and already covered with a brittle crust of pumice. The badge was nowhere to be seen.

Richard felt as if his legs were made of cotton wool. He sat down on the cold flags and lay the sickle down beside him.

"Maybe we can have some rest after we free Juroot," Melek said.

"Juroot!" Richard had almost forgotten about the Guardian. "We must work out how to reverse the spell. Melek, you said that Mirra used the mirrors and moonlight, and the prophecy mentioned blue and purple orbs."

He looked at the web of bright beams in the dark sky. The moons were white.

"Now, how are we going to get blue and purple lights to shine on to Juroot?" he asked aloud.

"Easy," Orkan said. "I'll show you." He seized a mirror and held it to catch the light from one of the moons.

Soon he had a beam of light playing over Juroot's face.

"That must be the way," Richard said, "but we need the light from blue and purple moons."

Orkan looked upwards at the sky and shrugged. "Let's wait and see what happens at dawn," he said. "Maybe the moons

will look different in daylight."

They flopped down on the stone floor to wait for dawn. With Mirra reduced to a shapeless lump, the huge square had lost its air of menace. Soon the trio fell asleep.

Sunrise came cautiously over Mirra's city, and it was a few minutes before the three realized what was happening.

Breaking the spell

"Get up," Richard shouted. "Quick!" He and Orkan each took a mirror. Above them the moons were reacting violently to daylight. As the sky brightened they began to change colour, flickering a little before glowing in all the colours of the rainbow.

Richard and Orkan adjusted their mirrors until blue and purple lightbeams met on Juroot's stony features. The mirrors shook as two bolts of pure energy shot out, making an audible rip in the air as they sped towards their target. Nothing happened at first, then Richard saw a tinge of colour spread over Juroot's stone features.

"Get back, Richard," Orkan shouted, "the mace!"

Looking up, Richard and Melek saw that Juroot's mace was beginning to move. The blow was about to fall directly where they were standing.

The three scattered just in time. The mace thundered to the ground with unbelievable force, sending a network of fine cracks shivering across the courtyard and spattering their heels with a hail of stony shrapnel.

For a moment Juroot's eagle eyes followed the three with deadly

intent. When his eyes stared into Richard's they widened in surprise.

"So the prophecy was right," he exclaimed, looking directly at Richard. "The one who sees in dark and light." Juroot's fierce features softened into benevolence. "You have done well to free me from Mirra's spell." He stepped away from the figure at his feet. Unstrapping a dagger from his belt, Juroot handed it to Richard. "Take this," he said, "it will serve you well on your quest. Now tell me what has been happening?"

"Thank you," Richard said. In his hands, the dagger looked more like a sword. Richard strapped it on to his own belt, and told Juroot about their recent encounters.

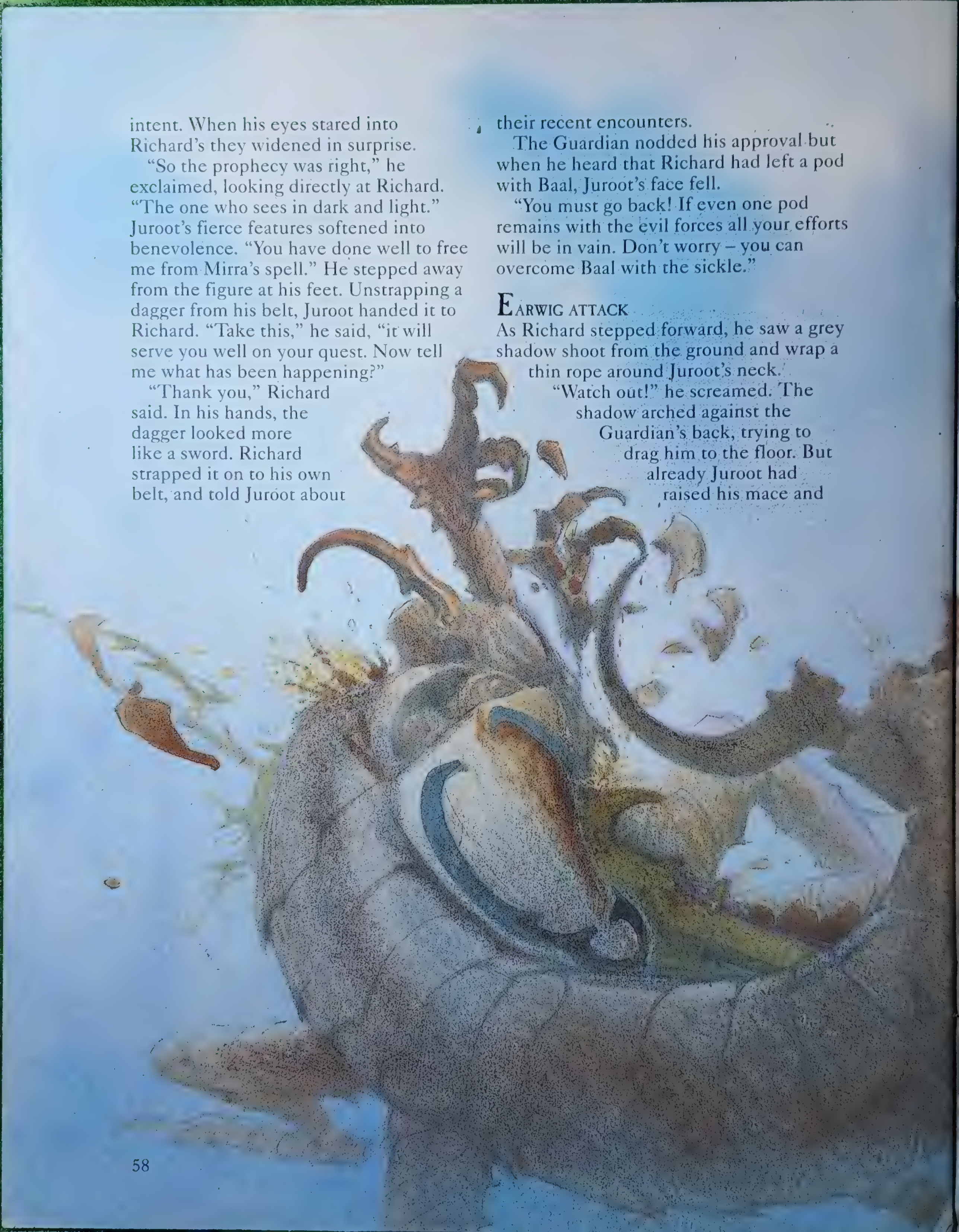
The Guardian nodded his approval but when he heard that Richard had left a pod with Baal, Juroot's face fell.

"You must go back! If even one pod remains with the evil forces all your efforts will be in vain. Don't worry – you can overcome Baal with the sickle."

Earwig attack

As Richard stepped forward, he saw a grey shadow shoot from the ground and wrap a thin rope around Juroot's neck.

"Watch out!" he screamed. The shadow arched against the Guardian's back, trying to drag him to the floor. But already Juroot had raised his mace and



sent his attacker crashing to the ground.

It was the earwig soldier that had lain at Juroot's feet. "Some of the moonbeams must have shone on him and reversed the spell," Juroot said. "There's more of his kind out there so be on your guard.

"Now," Juroot went on, "I must free my forces and continue the fight." He looked up at the bright moons still wheeling in the pale morning sky and Richard handed him the mirrors.

As they walked round the square, Juroot stopped and caught the moonbeams on the mirrors. Richard marvelled at his accuracy as one after the other, he brought his armoured bird forces back to life.

As colour rose back in them, each bird took a step forward and saluted their leader, Juroot.

As he worked, the Guardian told the trio about his capture and the rise of the Evil One. It had started on a small scale, then it got worse. People went missing, first one or two and then whole villages. Wells were poisoned and farms burnt down.

Rise of evil

It soon became clear that the whole fabric of the Ancestral World was gradually being undermined by some unseen force. Guardians were despatched to find out more. They, too, had disappeared. Juroot had been the third to venture forth and not return.

"You have much to do and very little time," Juroot told

Richard at last. "Go back and recover the pod from Baal. I shall continue here. Goodbye and good luck!"

Juroot raised his mace in salute and farewell as the three set off through the city gates and back up the hill to Cobweb Wood.

The going was harder than they expected. By the time they reached Baal's forest, sweat was pouring off Melek, who had to be hauled up the ridge by Orkan.

"I must rest awhile, these books seem to be getting heavier and heavier," Melek complained in a breathless voice.

"There's only one," Orkan snapped. "I know it's heavy, but you . . ."

"There's the other one too," Melek interrupted, catching his breath.

"What other one?" Richard asked.

"It's a book about monsters and magic," Melek said. "I have it in my pocket."

"Well, get rid of it," Orkan said,

annoyed at the dwarf for holding them up.

"No," Melek protested. "It might help us to outwit the Evil One."

"Let's see it then," Orkan said.

Melek gave a smug grin as he produced a small battered book from his pocket. The pages were of worn parchment and the cover bore an ancient script which read *Morbane's Book of Monsters and Magic.*

"How do you think the book will help us?" Richard asked.

"Morbane was the oldest and wisest of our magicians. He travelled the Ancestral World and wrote about the monsters he encountered. He describes the beasts and their magic powers, and even how some of them can be defeated. One of the stories almost matches what happened to us with Sumar, and I'm sure there's one about a monster turning people to stone," Melek said, proud of his knowledge.

Richard agreed that the book could be useful. "We'll look at it later," he said to Melek, "but now we must concentrate on getting the pod back."

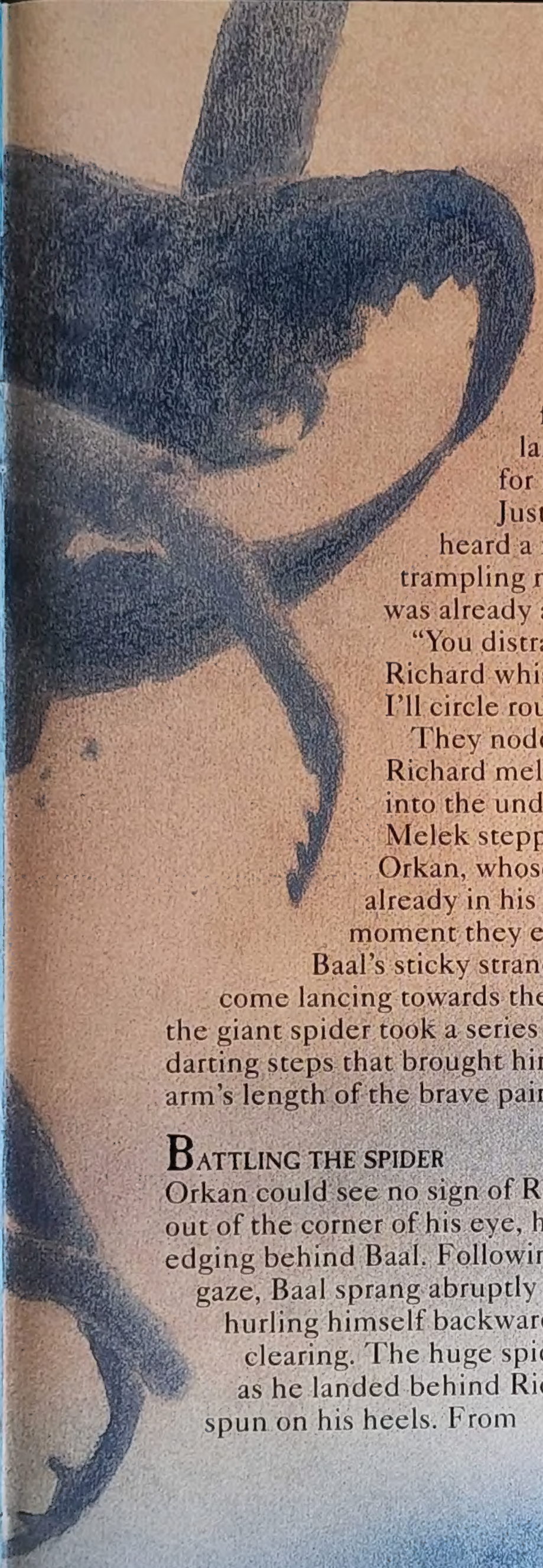
Melek nodded with a satisfied smile and put the book back in his pocket.

Lotan's demise

Cautiously the three made their way back to the clearing. Lotan's body lay where it had fallen, but there was little left of the monstrous snake which had once held Richard in its coils. Huge soldier ants had eaten away at his carcass, stripping flesh from bone with terrifying efficiency.

Richard shuddered as he watched the ants scurrying about, finishing off the last shreds of meat. Lotan's body had been reduced to clean, white bones, as if it had been dipped in acid.

"Let's get out of here," Richard said in



disgust.

"We'll head for Baal's larder and wait for him there."

Just then they heard a familiar trampling noise. Baal was already after them.

"You distract him," Richard whispered, "and I'll circle round behind."

They nodded, and Richard melted silently into the undergrowth. Melek stepped behind Orkan, whose sword was already in his hand. At any moment they expected Baal's sticky strands of silk to come lancing towards them. Instead the giant spider took a series of rapid, darting steps that brought him within arm's length of the brave pair.

Battling the spider

Orkan could see no sign of Richard. Then out of the corner of his eye, he saw him, edging behind Baal. Following Orkan's gaze, Baal sprang abruptly into the air, hurling himself backwards across the clearing. The huge spider reared up as he landed behind Richard, who spun on his heels. From beneath Baal's bulk, he saw the venomous pincers open and close in anticipation.

Summoning up all his strength, Richard hurled Mirra's sickle into Baal's soft belly. Then he raced over to Orkan and Melek. When he turned back, he found himself facing a statue of a spider with a sickle stuck firmly in its underside. Suddenly the statue began to wobble, then it toppled forward, burying the sickle forever beneath an immovable lump of rock.

Retrieving the pod

Richard shuddered. "Hand me the Path Finder," he said in a shaky voice. "Let's find the pod and get out of here."

He held out the instrument, and after a while, gold trembled at the arrow's tip. In silence, the companions forged their way through Cobweb Wood until they emerged in one of Baal's cocoon-filled larders. Richard stared at the clusters of silk bundles. There were many more than he could count and the thought of what they contained made his blood run cold.

"There it is!" Orkan pointed. Within one of the cocoons lay the pod, barely visible amongst the webs and shimmering balls of silk. Richard scooped it up.

"How did you manage to see it?" he asked, feeling the comforting warmth of the pod in his cupped hands.

"I'm used to looking for hidden things," Orkan replied mysteriously.

Glad to have got the pod back so quickly, Richard suggested that they head back to the ridge.

"The prophecy mentioned a surprise beyond the height," he said.

They reached the ridge and saw below them the steep, tree-clad slope down which they had tumbled earlier.

Into the abyss

"There seems to be a path of sorts," Orkan said, taking the lead. The track became narrower and narrower until they found themselves out of the trees and on a slender spit of rock that projected over an awesome abyss.

"We'll never get down there," Richard sighed, staring into the darkness below.

"What about Melek's rope?" Orkan suggested.

The words were hardly out of his mouth when there was a cracking beneath their feet. The narrow promontory shook briefly and then tumbled into space. With it went Orkan, Melek and Richard.

Shoomi's Sanctuary

Come into this ancient domain and use your powers of observation to find . . .

Shoomi and Shoobi

Shoomi and Shoobi still seem to be on our heroes' trail. Look out for them somewhere in the pages of this issue. They are not too difficult to find this time, but when the terrain is rough they look for more protection.

In issue 3, Shoomi and Shoobi appeared on page 34.

3-Minute Challenge

Juroot's Mace

The Guardian's spiky mace has been cleverly hidden in one of the illustrations. Can you find it in less than three minutes?

In issue 3, the fragments of the Evil One's mask were on pages 39 and 44.

Did you beat the challenge? If not try again this time!

Life Force Pod

Try the three-minute challenge again and spot the hidden Life Force Pod.

Watch out for a clue in issue 5 that tells you which of the Life Force Pods Richard has got.

Monsters and Magic

Read about Medusa and King Midas on Morbane's story cards. Which of these characters do you think Mirra is based on?

In issue 3, Baal was based on Biliku.

Check your answers in the next issue.

The Ancestral Trail

Cut out the tokens and locator cards, and keep them safe. More will be given at regular intervals. Details about **The Ancestral Trail** role-playing game and how to play it will appear in future issues.

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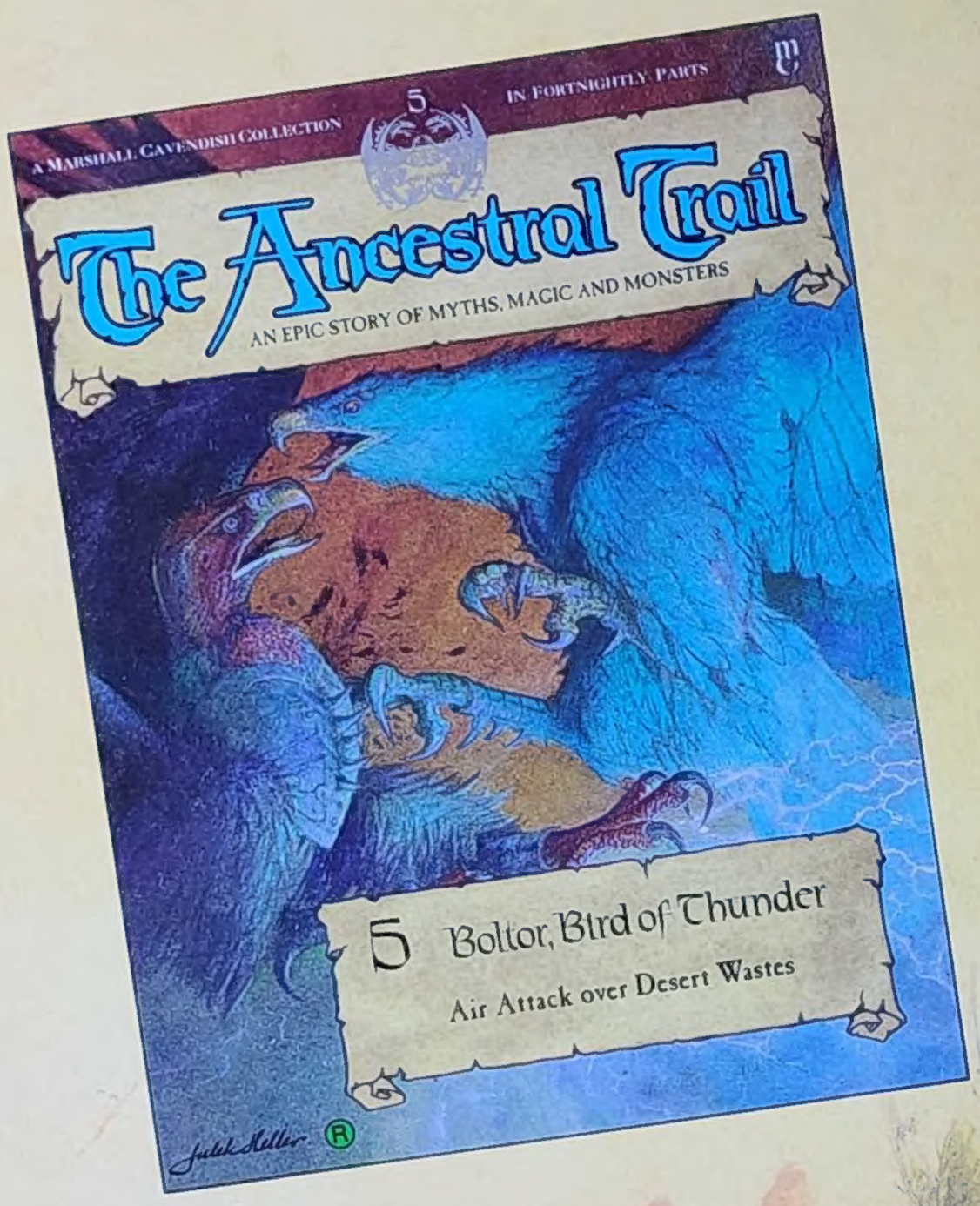

In Issue 5

Boltor, Bird of Thunder

The hapless trio are saved by a giant bird as they spiral through the air to certain death. But can their saviour save himself from a vicious air attack by Boltor and his forces?

plus

• Two pieces for the Ancestral World puzzle map and more letters for the competition.

• Two stories about unusual birds from Morbane. The evil Lightning Bird creates havoc in the skies and the invincible Stymphalian birds shoot brass feathers into the skulls of their prey.

FREE 8 more Monster Might cards for **The Ancestral Trail** pack.

Coming in Issue 6

Cozards and Killer Bees

Death squads are on the march in Green Man Wood. How will our travellers escape the Cozards' terrifying hunt-and-destroy tactics?

plus

Morbane's stories – a strange challenge by the Green Knight. Trees that speak and leaves that see • More tokens and locator cards.

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